

## **Slutchild - A Derry Fanfic by Larry Boodry**

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**Summary:** In her thirteen years, Beverly Marsh has seen a lot and endured more, and until this summer no one in Derry has shown her anything but indifference or contempt. But today all that is about to change. T/W: Child abuse.

# 1. Chapter 1

A/N: I have set this story in 1989, as the 2017 film did, but most of what happens is based on the Stephen King novel, and in some infrequent instances I have quoted the master directly. (One deviation from the novel I have incorporated is having Bev's father drink beer.)

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## Chapter 1 - In the Barrens

*Their morning game had been Richie's idea, a convoluted adventure featuring knights and castles and dragons, and at one point Bill had looked solemnly at Beverly and said, "Milady, thou cannot appear before the king in such an unshod and unfettered state."*

*She narrowed her green eyes suspiciously. "What's that mean?"*

*"Barefoot and braless," Ben supplied helpfully, leering at her.*

*"That's me," she'd agreed, then looked down at herself, at her small breasts poking proudly at the thin cotton of her denim shirt, and smiled ruefully.*

*"Can't do nothin' 'bout the braless part," she said finally, "an' God only knows where my shoes have gotten off to, but if the king don't like it he can kiss my unshod, unfettered ass!"*

*There'd been laughter all around, after which Eddie – dubbed 'King Eds' by Richie – decreed that they should break for lunch and meet back at the clubhouse in two hours' time.*

*And then Richie himself, doing a passable Yul Brynner, intoned "So it shall be written, so it shall be done," and they'd laughed again.*

*"Later, guys," Bev said, hugging each of them in turn. Then she tracked down her wayward sneakers and headed for home, blissfully unaware of what awaited her there.*

## 2. Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 – Bevvie Gets Home-Schooled

The rundown apartment complex at 127 Lower Main has three units, each with its own front and back entrance, and on this hot August morning Al Marsh watches through the living room window as his daughter comes up the cement walkway leading to their rickety front porch.

She is thirteen, a tall, slender girl with direct green eyes, wearing tight, faded cut-offs and an untucked denim shirt with the top two buttons missing, her long red hair loose from its usual ponytail and falling over one eye.

"She looks like a slut," he mutters, as it occurs to him now that she's been wearing her hair that way more and more lately.

But that lesson can wait, unlike the one she's gonna learn today.

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*He'd been down to Wally's Spa last night, not even done with his first beer, when Wally himself told him the rumor, and at first Al didn't take it too seriously.*

*"Yeah, right. Where'd you hear that shit?"*

*"Butch Bowers tol' me."*

*"Butch Bowers is an idiot. Where'd he hear it?"*

*"From Henry, I reckon. Boy's always prowlin' around down there with Huggins and Criss. They all seen her, an' not just once, neither."*

*Al still didn't believe it, he knows Henry has it in for Bevvie and might say anything, so this morning he'd followed her and seen for himself what she's been up to.*

*Then, stupid with rage, he'd come back here to wait for his little girl.*

*And now she's home.*

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Bev takes the four porch steps slowly, looking forward to an egg-salad sandwich and a nice, long shower. Then, leaning close to the door, she slips two fingers down her shirt and retrieves the housekey dangling between her breasts by a string, and unlocks the front door.

Once inside she pauses to kick off her muddy sneakers and shake out her tangled hair – which, truth be told, could use a good washing.

*Okay, shower first, then a sandwich.*

She locks the door, fully expecting herself to be alone and not wanting some pervert to walk in on her.

She isn't alone, however, and the pervert has his own key.

"Hello, Bevvie," her father says from behind her, and she spins around to see him standing by the front window.

*He's been waiting for me.*

"Oh, hey Daddy," she replies, trying to hide her dismay at finding him there. "Figured you'd be takin' lunch at Wally's again."

"Never mind about Wally's," Al says darkly as he takes a step closer to her. "Lemme get a closer look at you."

*'Cause I worry, Bevvie, his voice in her head. I worry a lot.*

Bev watches his eyes roam over her body, starting with the windblown, dirty hair and her flushed cheeks, then moving lower to stare at her chest, then down over her long legs to her bare feet.

"Bevvie, since when are you allowed to wear red whore's paint on your toes?"

"Since today. Mama says it's okay now that I'm getting older."

**"Damnit to hell, don't she know how I feel about that?"**

**Beverly shrugs. "Sure she knows. She says it ain't up to you."**

**Her father's face goes splotchy red, and for a second she thinks he might hit her, but instead he mutters, "Hell, she's another damn slut, just like you."**

**This is Al Marsh's way of conceding a point, but his next words chill her to the bone.**

**"You ready to be home-schooled, Bevvie-girl? I got a special lesson all planned out, just for you."**

**Her body goes still, every sense alert, but instead of the fear she usually feels at times like this, there is an icy calm she's never felt before.**

**Then, figuring if she's gonna take the class she might as well earn the grade, she says "You know, Daddy, if you acted more like a father and less like a teacher, folks might respect you more."**

**Al Marsh stares at his daughter a full ten seconds before his work-hardened palm explodes against the side of her face, then a vicious backhand slams her head against the wall.**

**"I'll learn you to sass me, you mouthy bitch!"**

**He grabs a fistful of her hair, swings her around, and sends her crashing face-first into the far wall.**

**She crumples to the floor, moaning and only half-conscious, blood streaming from her nose.**

**Al crosses the room, stands looking down at her for a moment, then hauls her to her feet by the hair and tosses her onto the sofa like a rag doll.**

**"I've seen you gettin' big," he says, looming over her, "since you was eleven I been watchin' you, tits like a little whore and no bra, and now you been runnin' with boys down in the Barrens."**

Bev flushes hot, her chest rising and falling with each gasping breath, and under the denim shirt her nipples go suddenly rock-hard and painful.

*If I had a knife I'd stab him.*

And now Al, unaware of his daughter's shift from fear to anger, hooks his fingers into the front of her shirt and pulls, tearing the fabric and sending buttons flying.

"What the hell, Daddy!"

"Shut your trap," he says, and for several seconds there is only the sound of his labored breathing as he stares at her partially-exposed breasts.

Finally he raises his eyes to hers. "Bevvie, I worry you been lettin' boys paw at you. Is that it? You bein' a slutchild again?"

*Again?*

"Wasn't bein' one before, neither, an' besides, no one but you ever paws me."

Al's eyes narrow, but she'd said it so innocently he decides to let it go.

"Whatever," he says, giving her a solemn look. "Take off them shorts."

Beverly isn't sure she heard right. "Huh? Why?"

"So I can make sure you're still intact."

"Intact?" she asks stupidly, then as understanding dawns she almost laughs. "Wait a minute. You mean intact like no one's busted my cherry yet?"

"Yeah. I wanna make sure some jizzbucket kid hasn't made a slut out of you."

*Jizzbucket?*

"So, lemme get this straight. If I let you squish your fingers around inside me like you did all them other times, does that mean you'll finally leave me alone?"

"Maybe," he says impatiently. "Just get 'em off."

She unsnaps and unzips her cut-offs, then appears to have second thoughts.

"What if Mama comes home?"

This stops him, and he looks nervously at his watch. "Your mama isn't due off work for hours."

Bev arches her brow. "Neither were you, an' look how *that* turned out."

"Aw, hell," he mutters. "We'll have to wait 'til tonight when she's asleep."

"Okay," she says, thinking *Maybe I'll be dead by then*.

Al watches her refasten her shorts and tie off her ruined shirt in a loose halter. Then in nonchalant tone he says, "Gimme a cigarette."

She stares at him. "Daddy, you know I don't smoke."

His hand comes down, another hard slap across the face, and she tastes blood at the corner of her mouth.

Then he hits her again with a closed fist, and the left side of her face goes numb.

"I seen you!" He drags her off the sofa - again by the damn hair - and slings her away from him. She falls against the coffee table, which collapses under her.

Bev groans and rolls over, watching him come toward her, her hair in her eyes as she looks up at him.

"I know you been down there, so don't you lie to me, y'hear?"

"I won't lie. How'd you know I was there?"

"I know 'cause someone told me, and this morning I followed you to see for myself, my Bevvie with a bunch of boys." His voice chokes with fresh rage. "Barely thirteen, an' already sluttin' herself down in the Barrens!"

Al aims a kick at her thigh, then her side, then flush on her left breast as she tries to scramble away from him on her butt. Another kick just misses her head.

"Barely thirteen," Al mutters, and now they are in the kitchen and he is giving her that solemn look again.

*She hates that look.*

"Bevvie, this is serious, so listen to me. Listen to Daddy. Hanging out with boys, letting 'em do God knows what to you, 'specially when you're just a kid – barely thirteen for Chrissakes – that's serious shit, and it's best you learn that now."

He takes her hand and pulls her almost gently to her feet, and she watches him warily as the lecture continues.

"You're a pretty girl. There's plenty of folks – plenty of *boys* - happy to ruin a pretty girl. You been a slutchild to any boys, Bevvie?"

"No, Daddy."

"I seen you smoking!" he bellows, and this time when he slaps her she staggers back, the small of her back striking the kitchen table hard enough to bring tears, and again she slumps to the floor.

He squats next to her, looking at her chest, and slips the knot she'd tied in her shirt.

*This is not my daddy, she thinks, my daddy is an asshole but not like this.*

She squirms as he slides a calloused palm roughly over her



breasts, then shudders at a sudden new thought.

*Maybe It's inside him, using the bad stuff that's already there to hurt me in ways Daddy never dared.*

And now, as if to prove her theory, the man mauling her breasts begins to chant in a schoolboy's voice that is more Pennywise the Clown than Al Marsh the janitor:

*"A girl who will chew gum will smoke! A girl who will smoke will drink! And a girl who will drink, everyone knows what a girl like that will do!"*

"I didn't do anything!" Bev screams in rage and frustration, expecting another slap or worse, but instead Al (or whoever the hell this is) just sighs and begins massaging her bare shoulders under the shirt.

*Ooh, that feels good, she thinks. But I wish it was Bill doing me like that, or Ben, or maybe both of them together.*

Then her father starts talking again, and her fantasy dies a slow, painful death.

"Beverly," he says sadly, pulling her to her feet and plopping her none-too-gently into a kitchen chair, "I seen you with boys. Now you want to tell me what a girl does with boys down in all that trashwood if it ain't what a girl does flat on her back?"

His words infuriate her, that stupid look is on his face again, and she's had enough.

"Leave me alone!" she screams at him, a lifetime of hurt in her green eyes. "You just leave me the hell alone!"

"Don't talk to your daddy like that," he warns, looking a bit startled at her defiance.

"I didn't do what you're saying! I *never* did!"

"Maybe, maybe not," he replies calmly, "but I'm gonna check just the same. Take off them shorts."

"You said tonight," she reminds him, playing for time and forcing herself not to panic.

"I changed my mind. Get 'em off."

"No."

His eyes narrow. "What was that, Bevvie? I don't think I heard you right."

"You heard me just fine, Daddy. I said *no*."

Al stares at his daughter, wondering at – and not liking – this sudden rebellion from her. And before he can process her newfound attitude, she goes on the offensive.

"Who told you?"

"Huh? Who told me what?"

"Who fucking told you we play down there? Was it that creep Henry Bowers? Or was it some guy in a clown suit who isn't really a clown? C'mon, Daddy, talk to me!"

"It was Henry an' them that seen you. But look here, Bevvie, you want to stop this nonsense right now, 'fore I get really mad."

She glares at him and pushes back some of the hair veiling her bruised and bloody face.

"Daddy, if *this* ain't really mad, you might as well just up and kill me now."

"Don't tempt me," he mutters, taking a final sip from a bottle of Black Label beer on the table, then going to the fridge for a fresh one. He uncaps the new bottle and takes a swig before coming back to stand in front of her.

"So what'll it be, Bevvie? You want me to home-school you some more, or you had enough?" He sets the half-empty bottle on the table, his tone more mocking than angry. "Or maybe you'd like a cigarette?"

She shakes her head.

"No? Then how 'bout a beer? Come on, you're so grown-up now – *barely fucking thirteen* – have some smokes and a brew with the old man!"

His mockery infuriates her all over again – *How dare he!* - and now, as he starts to turn away, Bev looks at him through her bangs and gives him the finger.

With both hands.

His fist finds her already sore nose, bringing a fresh flow of blood that splatters on her shirt and falls in great big drops onto her bare chest and belly.

Bev and her chair hit the floor hard, tangled together, and Al rights the chair first. Then he buries his fingers in her hair – of *course* in her hair - to bring her to her feet. He holds her up that way, her toes barely touching the tile floor as he sinks a meaty fist into her belly and throws her so violently into the chair that she almost goes sprawling again.

"Next time I'll break them fingers," he says, leaving the kitchen for his bedroom. "You stay put, little girl, 'less you want this to go worse than it already is."

*He's going for the whuppin' belt, Bevvie girl. Time to haul ass.*

But she sits there for just a minute more, bent so far forward in her chair that the ends of her hair tickle her red-painted toes as she struggles to catch her breath.

Finally she forces herself to stand, looking around through her veil of wild hair. Al's pack of Marlboro 100s goes in the pocket of her shorts, his half-drunk beer goes down her throat, and Beverly Marsh pads on silent bare feet to the front door.

Her father's voice from the kitchen doorway stops her.

"Where the hell you think you're goin'? Get your ass back in here!"

"No," she says, amazed at how easy to say – and how liberating – that one little word can be

"Don't make me come over there and fetch you, Bevvie. You're gonna be one sorry-assed little girl if I have to come fetch you."

"I'm *already* one sorry-assed little girl," she retorts, "and I ain't staying here another minute."

"Damnit girl, get away from that door right now, or by God I'll beat the living shit outta you!"

Beverly watches him warily, ready to bolt if he makes any sudden moves. When she finally speaks, her voice is steady.

"No, Daddy. You want to hurt me, and I won't let you do that anymore. I love you, but I hate you when you get like this."

For just an instant Al Marsh looks puzzled, maybe even a little hurt, as he lets his right hand - the one holding the belt - fall to his side.

And Beverly, in that same instant, reaches behind her to unlock the door, stoops quickly to snatch up one of her sneakers, and flings it at him.

Then she yanks open the door and runs like hell.

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Chapter 3 – Bev On The Run

Her escape almost ends before it starts, as Bev takes the porch steps in one agile leap, lands awkwardly, and goes sprawling on the front walk.

*Way to go, Bevvie-girl.*

Bev hears Al's roar of rage behind her, jumps to her feet, and takes off in a sprint with him close on her heels.

She passes old Bucky Pasquale watering his lawn and listening to the Red Sox on the radio, then the Zinnerman kids washing the family car, and little Lars Theramenius pulling his red wagon, all of whom stare at her and her pursuing father, but nobody makes a move to intervene.

*And they won't, neither, even if he kills me.*

She forces herself to run faster, out of Old Cape now and headed for downtown, her hair in her face and her lungs burning in her chest.

*I need a place to hide, she thinks, where Daddy won't think to look.*

But where?

Bev cuts across Main Street, dodging traffic, then ducks quickly down the alley that runs behind Warehouse Row.

Her nose wrinkles at the smell, the dumpsters back here are filled with rotted meat and other smelly dead things, the cobblestones under her bare feet are wet and slimy, and somewhere behind her Al Marsh is still too close.

"Get the hell back here, you little bitch!" he yells, and Bev looks around wildly for a place to hide.

Then it hits her.

## *Dumpsters.*

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Al hits the head of the alley not far behind his daughter, out-of-breath and panting, and the first thing he sees are two men eating lunch on the loading dock of Kirshner Packing Works.

One of them puts down his sandwich, eyeing him with no friendliness as he approaches.

"You lost, mister?"

"Lookin' for my little girl. You seen her?"

"Well now," the other one says, "that depends. Is she a pretty little thing, green eyes an' red hair, an' her face lookin' like some asshole smacked the shit out of her?"

"Ayuh, that's her," Al replies angrily. "But I ain't no asshole, I'm her goddamn father!"

"One don't preclude the other," the first man tells him. "But ifn she's your little girl you got a right to discipline her how you see fit. Ain't that so, Arnie?"

"I reckon," Arnie agrees, spitting in the general direction of Al's shoes. "An' now that she's long gone—Say, Jimmy, ain't that her?" His gaze suddenly fixes on the far end of the alley.

"Where?" Al cries, his own eyes searching in that direction, and before either man can say another word, he takes off running.

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Beverly huddles in the dumpster next to the loading dock, every inch of her skin and hair glistening with wet, icky trash slime.

She listens as her father confronts the two men – Jimmy and Arnie – then sighs gratefully as Al runs off down the alley.

Footsteps approach her hiding place. "Hey, kid, he's gone. You can come out now."

*Thank God.*

Someone flings back the lid on the dumpster, and Bev winces at the sudden glare of sunlight. Then strong hands lift her out and set her down on unsteady feet.

"You okay, kid?" the one she thinks is Jimmy asks with real concern in his voice. "How bad did that abusive prick hurt you?"

"Bad enough," she admits truthfully, "But it woulda been worse if you an' Arnie there hadn't lied to my daddy."

"Wait," he says as Arnie comes up next to him. "You know our names?"

Beverly's hands go to her hips. "I'm not deaf, an' I can read a shirt same as anybody."

Jimmy grins, putting his hands up in surrender. "Okay, okay, so you pay attention real good. What's *your* name?"

"Beverly Marsh. My few friends call me Bev."

The two of them share a knowing look, and the warmth in her green eyes turns to glittering ice.

"Well, fuck me, hey? And fuck you too for believin' what folks in this shitty town say about me!"

Bev starts to cry, stupid silent tears that track through the grime on her cheeks, and again Jimmy raises his hands.

"No, Bev, listen to me. Whatever this is, it isn't about you."

"It's not?" She snuffles and wipes at her eyes.

"No. Our sister Kay starts at Derry Elementary next month, and we been warned about a custodian with groping hands. His last name's the same as yours, so I figure that was him we just met."

*So it ain't just me*, she thinks, hating her father even more.

"It was."

Jimmy's brother – she can see the resemblance now – speaks to her for the first time, looking rather shy.

"Um, if you don't mind me askin', what is it people hereabouts say about you?"

"They say I'm a slut," she tells them, and Jimmy surprises her by laughing his ass off.

Beverly glares at him. "What's so goddamn funny?"

"Well, Bev," he says, trying to get himself under control, "you may not be what they call you, but if your shirt keeps untying itself like that, I can see where they might get the idea."

She looks down at herself, and sure enough, her makeshift halter has come undone.

"Oh, hell," she mutters, blushing and quickly re-knotting her shirt. "Sorry 'bout that."

Jimmy grins. "Don't be. You got nothin' to be sorry *for*." Then he winks at her, and Bev feels several butterflies start to flutter around in her belly.

*Horny* butterflies.



## 4. Chapter 4

### Chapter 4 – Bowers and Huggins and Criss, Oh My

A few minutes later, after saying goodbye to – and exchanging numbers with – Jimmy and Arnie, Bev finds herself walking along Kansas Street toward the Barrens, unshod, unfettered, and more than a little fragrant.

She doesn't expect anyone to be in the clubhouse yet, but her plan is to go hide out there for a bit, maybe get some rest and sort out her thoughts.

*Can't believe I defied Daddy*, Bev thinks, knowing she doesn't dare go home, not now and maybe not ever, but knowing also that she has nowhere else to go.

It is a testament to her weariness and confusion at that moment that she doesn't hear the footfalls behind her until it is too late.

"Goin' somewhere, Tits?" a voice croons almost in her ear, and before Beverly can run Henry grabs a fistful of her hair and slams her against the brick wall of a building.

She'd forgotten about Henry, but now here he is, flanked by Victor and Belch, and she is so screwed.

Bev struggles fiercely, stomping on his instep, but her bare foot is no match for Henry's heavy boot, and he just laughs.

"Nice try, cunt," he says, pressing the blade of a switchblade against her neck, and just like that Beverly stops struggling.

*Stops breathing.*

"That's more like it, Tits," Henry says, his rancid breath hot on her face as he trails the knife from her neck to her breasts, then down to her belly button. "I think I'm gonna have me some fun, maybe start by carving my initials into your belly like I done Haystack that time, then cut off your nipples, then all that pretty hair-"

What might have happened next is interrupted by the blare of a car horn.

"Here! Here! What are you boys doing? Leave that girl go!"

They look over to see an old lady – Beverly recognizes her old 5th.-grade teacher, Henrietta Dumont - behind the wheel of her ancient 1950 Ford.

"Please help me!" she cries, struggling once more as Henry's knife moves away from her skin and Belch looks around nervously.

"Dude, maybe we should go-"

But Henry, as usual, ignores him.

Mrs. Dumont stares at them, her face a mixture of anger and concern, and again she calls for them to let Beverly go, but Henry's grip only tightens as he drags her toward the car by her hair.

"See this, lady? This is Tits. Me an' Tits are havin' us a party." Still pulling Beverly along behind him, Henry takes the switchblade and puts a deep scratch in the woman's passenger-side window. "But this here is a *private* party, you old bitch, so unless you want some of what Tits is about to get, I suggest you mind your own goddamn business."

The old woman's eyes widen in sudden fear, and Bev's heart drops as her potential rescuer drives off with a screech of rubber.

Henry smiles at Bev, his eyes dead and vacant, and moves the knife up toward the tangle of her hair.

"Okay, you little prick-teaser, lessee how you like bein' bald." And to Victor and Belch he says, "Hold her arms while I scalp the bitch."

But Beverly loves her hair, and the thought of losing even one measly strand to a creep

(jizzbucket)

like Henry-freakin'-Bowers just won't do.

"Not my hair, you sonovabitch!" she screams, and plants the leather-tough sole of her bare foot right in his balls.

Then she picks up the switchblade and looks at Belch and Victor.

"You know, guys, I'm having a *really* shitty day, and I'm tired of people dragging me around by the hair like some stupid-ass cavegirl, and if you shitheels wanna mess with me some more, then come on."

They don't move.

"Didn't think so," Bev mutters, walking over to where Henry lies curled on the sidewalk, moaning and clutching his crotch. She squats next to him, fingers a greasy lock of his hair, and slices it off. Then she straightens up and steps back so she can keep all three of them in her sight.

"We'll be in the sewers tonight, *clowning* around, and maybe you all should come play, too."

Then, without another word, she pockets Henry's knife and walks away.

---

As Beverly approaches the clubhouse she doesn't hear anything, no voices, no radio, no nothing.

*Damn, she thinks, I was hoping they'd be here by now, we need a plan for Pennywise, or It, or whatever the fuck has been killing kids since like forever.*

*(I'll be waiting.)*

She stops dead, looking around, but instead of the fear she might have felt yesterday – the fear she knows the clown *wants* her to feel - Bev feels...happy. And in her happiness she laughs,

a rude laugh that Al Marsh would undoubtedly slap her for.

*Bring it on, Bozo. And quit tryin' to mind-fuck me, or I will hurt you.*

(Impudent little bitch. How dare you mock me?)

*'Cause it's so much fun to yank your chain.*

She listens, but there is nothing more, and she figures whatever was there is now gone. And only then does she hear it, Tom Petty singing *I Won't Back Down* on Richie's boombox, while an off-key voice tries to keep pace.

*Ben's voice.*

"Ben, is that you? Please say it's you."

"It's me," Ben assures her as he pops up through the open trapdoor of their clubhouse with a box of Junior mints in one hand and a Louis L'Amour paperback in the other.

At the sight of him it all catches up to her, and with a ragged sob Beverly launches herself into the hole.

## 5. Chapter 5

### Chapter 5 – In The Clubhouse

"Oof!"

Ben tries to catch her, he really does, but in the end all he can do is break her fall.

Leaving him flat – or as flat as *he'll* ever be – on his back with Beverly Marsh straddling him, all wild, dirty hair and bare legs, and small pointy tits plainly visible under her gaping shirt.

*What the hell just happened here?*

They stare at each other.

"Bev, what's wrong?" he finally asks once his breath comes back, and his voice breaks the spell.

"We need to shut everything," she says, jumping to her feet. "They're coming!"

"Who's coming?"

"Henry an' them. And Ben? Henry's got a knife."

*That* gets him moving. As Beverly stands on tiptoe to close the slitted window, Ben pulls the trapdoor shut with a grunt and locks it.

Bev reaches for him and hugs him, her near-naked body trembling against his bulky one.

They are on their knees, holding each other desperately, when Bev realizes with sudden horror that Richie's boombox is still playing somewhere nearby.

*'Hell Is For Children'* by Pat Benatar, a song she relates to on a daily basis, but right now she doesn't need the reminder.

*Or the sound of it, luring Henry Bowers right to them.*

"Oh God, Ben, the music! They'll hear it!"

"Shit!" He almost knocks her sprawling in his haste to reach the radio, then she hears a loud crash and Pat Benatar goes silent.

"Ben, what happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he says, crawling back to her. "But Richie's boombox bit the dust. Literally."

Bev reaches for him again and pulls him close. His hand accidentally brushes one of her bare breasts and he pulls it away like he's been burned.

"Don't be scared," she whispers, taking his hand and pressing it against her heart.

Ben sighs, he's never dreamed it could be like this with her, and he buries his nose in her hair.

They stay like that for a long while, facing each other on their knees again, while above them Henry and his friends curse and stalk the clearing looking for her. And finally Ben can resist no longer and whispers, "Bevvie, darling, I just *love* your shampoo."

She gasps and deperately stifles her laughter against the bulk of his chest.

---

Henry, Victor, and Belch eventually tire of their search, but only after several close calls in which the trapdoor vibrates under the weight of all three of them, and clods of dirt fall onto Beverly's upturned face and into her hair.

*Like I'm not filthy enough*, she thinks dismally, pressing herself even closer against Ben, who – to her eternal relief – doesn't seem to mind.

Ben now sits with his back against one wall of the clubhouse, with Beverly snuggled safely in his lap, and she welcomes the

comforting bulk of his body against hers.

"Ben?"

"Hmmm?"

"I'm glad there's so much of you to hold."

At first she is afraid that her words offended him, but then he hugs her tighter and mutters "Me, too," into her hair.

An amicable silence settles between them, and after a while Beverly, unaware she was going to say anything at all, says, "Thank you for the poem, Ben."

He takes a dirty handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his face with it, and Beverly has the distinct impression that the boy is stalling.

Only after the handkerchief is back in his pocket does Ben give her a solemn look and say, "Poem?"

"The Haiku. The haiku you sent me on the postcard. You *did* send it, didn't you?"

"No," Ben says, suddenly bitter. "I didn't send you any haiku. 'Cause if a kid like me – a *fat* kid like me – did something like that, the girl would probably laugh at him."

"I didn't laugh, Ben," she says softly. "I thought it was beautiful."

"I could never write anything beautiful," Ben insists. "Bill, maybe, but not me."

"Bill will write," she concedes. "But he'll never write anything as nice as that haiku."

Ben sighs in resignation and says, "How'd you know it was me?"

"Not sure *how* I knew," she tells him. "I just did."

He looks down at his hands. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"You'd better not mean *that*," she says crossly, "'cause if you do it's gonna spoil an already fucked-up day."

Still looking down, Ben says, "I do love you, Bev, more than you know. But I don't want that to ruin anything."

"It won't." She hugs him fiercely. "And right now, Ben Hanscom, I need all the love I can get."

"But you 'specially like Bill," he mutters, and the jealousy in his voice almost makes her smile.

"Maybe I do," she says, "but that don't matter. I happen to like you all, and love you all, with my whole heart." She smiles crookedly at him. "And that goes *double* for you."

"Thank you, Bev. And just so you know, I'm glad you figured out it was me who wrote the haiku."

They sit quietly for a bit, and again Beverly feels safe and protected. She knows Ben would die for her – as she would for him – and something deep within her, something utterly primal, responds to him as to no other.

*Not even Bill.*

---

A little past one Beverly looks at her watch and says, "Hey, Ben?"

"Yeah?"

"Shouldn't the others be back by now?"

He shrugs. "I guess, but this is nice, too, with just the two of us here in the dark."

"For sure," she says, meaning it wholeheartedly, but the memory of how Henry'd been earlier has her scared, and she turns anxious eyes on Ben.

"I'm afraid, Ben. You didn't see how Henry was, he threatened to



carve my tummy the way he did yours, said he wanted to cut off my nipples, and when Mrs. Dumont tried to help me, he screamed at her and scratched up that old car she drives."

"Jesus," Ben mutters. "How'd you get shut of him?"

Beverly shrugs. "I kicked him in the nuts, took his knife, and walked away."

The part about cutting off a piece of Henry's hair she keeps to herself.

---

"You got an extra shirt in that thing?" Beverly asks behind him, and Ben turns, backpack in hand, to see her standing in the middle of the clubhouse in just her panties.

*Red* panties.

"Jesus, Bev. You should warn a guy."

Her hands go to her hips, a gesture he's become quite familiar with over the last two months.

"What, now you're shy? Like maybe you haven't spent the past hour staring at and fondling my naked tits?"

"Yeah, but..."

He wants to say, *But that was in the dark with the trapdoor closed*, but Bev cuts him off.

"But nothing. I enjoyed cuddling with you – a lot – an' I figure it won't be the last time we do it, and my own clothes are trashed. So shut up an' gimme a shirt."

He tosses her a wrinkled-but-clean gray t-shirt with *Derry H.S. Tigers* on the front of it, and Beverly slips it over her head and pulls her hair out through the neck.

*Ben wore this*, she thinks, liking the feel of soft cotton against her skin, but the hem falls to her knees and the sleeves are so

voluminous she can barely move – or even see - her arms.

*Well, hell.*

Beverly yanks the shirt back over her head, then bends to retrieve Henry's switchblade from the pocket of her discarded shorts.

Ben goes pale at the sight of it. "Holy shit, where'd you get *that*?"

"It was Henry's, like I told you." She uses the switchblade to quickly shorten the shirt's length and hack off the sleeves. "I took it off him after kicking his balls up into his ribcage."

The shirt fits much better when she puts it on the second time, hanging only to mid-thigh with big arm-holes that will give anyone standing next to her a nice side-view of her unfettered self.

"How's that?" she asks, twirling for him, but Ben isn't paying attention.

"Bev, you can't keep Henry's knife."

"Why not?" Again her hands go to her hips.

"Because the cops found Butch Bowers dead this morning, stabbed through the throat. They think Henry done it."

Beverly's eyes widen in shock. "Wait, what? Where the fuck did you hear that?"

"On the radio before you got here." He runs a shaky hand through his hair. "Bev, that knife has a dead man's blood on it."

She feels a shudder go through her as she realizes how close she'd come to having *her* blood on it, and she clutches the front of Ben's shirt.

"Ben, get rid of it. Get rid of it *now*."

She watches as Ben picks the knife up from where she'd tossed

it, uses the tail of his shirt to wipe the handle free of prints, and tosses the damn thing as far as he can out the trapdoor. Then something occurs to her.

"Hey, Ben?"

"Yeah?"

"Shouldn't we keep the trapdoor shut? What if Henry an' them come back?"

He shrugs. "We're leaving soon, and besides I needed to air the place out."

Bev blushes and stares down at her dirty bare feet. "Sorry."

Hating how miserable she looks, Ben reaches out to muss her already-trashed hair.

"Hey, don't be," he says. "It ain't like I'm so minty-fresh myself, so relax."

She looks up to see *him* staring at her feet as intently as she'd just been.

"What?"

"You need to wear something on your feet," he says.

"Why? They're as filthy as the rest of me, and my sneakers are at home."

He shakes his head and starts digging around again in his backpack. "It's not about keeping 'em clean, it's about keeping 'em cute."

"What do you mean?" she asks, trying to get her head around the fact that Ben Hanscom thinks she has cute feet.

*I may never wear shoes again.*

"Here." He hands her a pair of purple flip-flops. "These should

help keep you from slicing your feet all to hell down in the sewers."

Beverly stares at him with wide, shimmering eyes.

"A girl could do worse than marrying a boy like you," she murmurs softly, then raises up on her toes to kiss him, a soft, shy kiss that gradually grows more insistent, and when she finally pulls back to stare at him, they are both breathless.

And very much in love.

## 6. Chapter 6

### Chapter 6 – Making Plans

Unknown to Beverly and Ben, Henry Bowers has discovered their hideout, and now he, Belch, and Victor are crouched in the trees at the edge of the clearing.

"We gonna get 'em, Henry?" Victor asks, as the fat kid climbs out of the hole and reaches down to help the bitchgirl clamber out after him.

"Not yet. We'll follow to see where they go, and get 'em when they're all together." His menacing gaze fixes on the other two. "And when we do, the slut is mine."

Belch grins in eager anticipation, watching the sway of the girl's breasts under the Derry High t-shirt. "Whatcha gonna do to her, Henry?"

Henry's eyes glitter. "First I'm gonna take my knife back, then I'm gonna carve my name on her tits, and then..." - he pauses for effect - "...I'm gonna shove my dick so far down her throat it comes out her drippy cunt."

*Belch and Victor get hard just imagining Henry's plan, unaware that neither of them will survive the skirmish he's about to lead them into.*

---

As they make their way along Old Lyme Street, the rutted dirt road leading out of the Barrens, Ben stops so suddenly Bev almost crashes into him.

"What's wrong?" she asks, even as the wind picks up and the first cold drops of rain splatter against her bare skin.

"Shhh," Ben whispers. "I thought I heard something back the way we came." He runs a nervous hand through his hair. "What if it's Henry an' them?"

"Shit on that," she retorts, and in that moment, had their adversaries shown themselves, Ben has no doubt that Bev would happily grab the nearest fallen branch and walk in swinging. "Besides, they're just pussies anyway."

And with that, she takes hold of his hand and leads them toward Kansas Street.

---

Not far back along Old Lyme, Henry hears Beverly's derisive comment and swears, almost abandoning his idea of letting the little bitch rejoin her friends.

He wants his hands on her *now*.

---

The rain quickly becomes a torrential downpour, and by the time Beverly and Ben approach the other Losers in front of Center Street Drug Beverly is soaked to the skin.

She feels Ben try to pull his hand free of hers and angrily tightens her grip.

"Leave it there," she hisses. "If I'm good enough to hold hands with when we're alone, then I'm damn sure good enough to hold hands with when we're not."

Ben barely hears her. He and the five other boys are all staring at the 13-year-old goddess in their midst, *his* 13-year-old goddess, with her wet hair whipping in the wind and Ben's own t-shirt plastered to her breasts.

"C'mon, guys," he says, "quit staring. She's just wet, like the rest of us."

"Like hell," Richie mutters. "We all might be soaked, but none of the rest of us looks *that* good in a wet t-shirt."

"Not even you, Haystack," Bill chimes in, not stuttering at all, and the laughter that follows breaks the tension.

For her part, Beverly decides she likes being gaped at, and likes

that Ben stuck up for her, and if her father doesn't like it he can just go pound sand.

She turns to smile warmly at Ben, missing the look on Bill's face. He has taken note of her new closeness with Ben, the easy – and yes, possessive – way her hand rests in his, with fingers entwined. They are protective of each other in a way they weren't before, and Bill knows that whatever chance he might have had with her is gone.

"I think Henry an' his goons followed us from the clearing," Ben says, noting Bill's reaction to him and Beverly, and feeling a sharp – if rather brief – pang of sympathy for his friend.

*She's mine.*

"Oh, shit," Stan mutters. "Like we need *those* assholes figuring out where we're going."

"They already know," Bev informs them, looking down at her red toenails and purple flip-flops.

The boys stare at her again, but not like they had just a moment ago.

"How?" Bill demands, with still no stutter but plenty of suspicion.

His tone stings, and now she looks up, forcing herself to meet six pairs of accusing eyes.

"I sort of invited them."

"You what?" Richie cries. "Even Molly Ringwald wouldn't be *that* stupid."

Beverly gives him the finger.

"Wait," Bill says quickly, trying to avert bloodshed between his two most hot-tempered Losers. "When did you sort-of invite them?"

"Prob'ly after she drop-kicked Henry in the 'nads," Ben says, then shoots a glare at Richie. "And even Molly-freakin'-Ringwald wouldn't be *that* brave."

This earns him a hand squeeze from Bev, who turns her glittering green eyes on Bill.

"Look, Bill, maybe it *was* stupid of me to do what I did, but I am *so* goddamn tired of being scared, okay? I'm tired of my father *worrying* about me, 'cause he worries a *lot*. I'm tired of Pennywise-The-Stupid-Clown killing kids. And right now I am *very* tired of Henry-dipshit-Bowers threatening to carve up my tits like a damn Thanksgiving turkey."

She gazes around at them, breathing hard, her face half-hidden by her sodden hair.

"This shit ends today, y'hear? One way or the other, *it fucking ends today*."

With that fierce declaration, Bev turns on her heel and heads back toward the Barrens, pulling Ben behind her and leaving the others to follow or not.

And as he watches her go, Bill Denbrough thinks wryly to himself that not only has he just lost the girl to Ben Hanscom, but he has also likely just lost control of the Losers to the girl.

*Sigh.*

---

*And so they set out on their last great adventure of childhood, seven friends off to slay a monster, only in this case the monster is real.*



## 7. Chapter 7

### Chapter 7 – After the Sewers

*We'll never be together like this again, Beverly thinks, not ever.*

*The thought is like a stab to her heart, deeper than any wound Henry Bowers or Al Marsh could ever inflict on her, and she feels sudden tears on her cheeks, hot and bitter.*

*"I love you guys so much," she says, the words choking on a sob.*

*Going from one to the other, she presses the full length of herself against them, kissing them with a desperation she's never felt before. And when their bodies respond, poking against her belly, she feels no pleasure or sense of power, just a keen sense of loss so sharp she wants to scream.*

*It's not fair. It's not fucking fair.*

*And then they're gone, heading home for supper like any other goddamn day, leaving just her and Ben – dear, steadfast Ben – to watch them go.*

*"Take me home," she whispers, but when he starts leading her toward Old Cape where she lives, she stops him. "I meant home with you."*

*Where I'll be safe.*

---

At Ben's house they find a note from Arlene Hanscom letting Ben know she won't be home 'til late, so they shower (together, much to Ben's embarrassment), then make love in his room while the washer washes and the dryer dries.

And when it's over they lay in each other's arms, and whisper words of forever, and for now that will have to be enough.

---

"You sure I can't walk you home?" Ben asks for what seems like

the zillionth time, and Beverly rolls her eyes.

"Ben, I'll be fine. Mama should be home from work by now, an' Daddy never touches me when she's there. But if he sees *you* anywhere near me, he's liable to fetch his gun."

"Your daddy has a gun? That's sorta scary."

She shrugs. "They both do. I keep hopin' they'll just shoot each other an' be done with it."

"Jesus," Ben mutters, pushing a hand through his hair. Then something occurs to him. "Um, my mom has a gun in her nightstand, you could borrow it if you want to."

Bev almost considers the idea, but with her luck she'd miss her first shot and Daddy would just take the gun away and pistol-whip the shit out of her.

So okay, no gun.

They are standing on the Hanscom front porch, she needs to get home, and when Ben holds out his arms Bev walks into them and buries her face against his shoulder and starts to sob.

*Oh, Ben, don't you ever forget me. Don't you dare.*

---

In her neighborhood, most families are lucky to have one car that isn't up on blocks, and two cars are unheard of, but Al and Elfrida Marsh each possess their own: a '76 Cutlass for her, and a '67 GTO for him, both in mint condition thanks to Joe Tammerly, Al's mechanic buddy.

As Bev crosses the muddy, weed-strewn lot behind her building, wearing Ben's Derry High shirt like a dress and carrying her flip-flops, she sees a light through the kitchen window and only Mama's Cutlass parked alongside the back porch.

*Thank God, Daddy must still be down to Wally's Spa.*

She ducks a low-hung clothesline, and right then her bare toe

stubs itself on something hidden in the weeds.

"Oh, fucking ow," she mutters in a low, pathetic whimper, the flare of pain brief but intense as she stoops to see what she had tripped on.

An axe-handle missing the axe part, which, given the naked and *unshod* state of her toes is probably a good thing.

Letting her flip-flops fall, Beverly hefts the polished wood in her stronger left hand, then slaps it a couple of times against her right palm.

Thus armed, and with her toe feeling almost normal, Bev heads for the kitchen door.

## 8. Chapter 8

### Chapter 8 – Bevvie and Mama Have Words

Her mother is there when Beverly comes into the kitchen, sitting at the table with her second bottle of Black Label and an ever-present cigarette jutting from her mouth.

"Well, well, look what the cat drug in," Elfrida Marsh says as their eyes meet, and Beverly flashes her a *where-to-go-and-what-to-do-there* look.

"Wasn't no *cat* draggin' me earlier. It was Daddy."

*Well*, Elfrida thinks ruefully, *that explains the busted coffee table, the blood on the wall, and the club in her hand.*

"That was a figure of speech, smart girl," she says, as Beverly gets a Pepsi from the fridge and sits across from her. Then she notices her daughter's swollen lips and stiff way of moving, and her eyes sharpen.

"You been swappin' spit with some boy, Bevvie?"

"Not just spit, Mama. And not just with one boy, neither."

Elfrida isn't sure she wants to explore *that* particular topic, so she picks another one.

"Where'd you get that awful shirt?"

"I'd rather not tell you."

Elfrida sighs in exasperation. "Okay, fine. What happened to your *regular* clothes?"

"Rather not tell you that, either."

*No wonder Al hits her.*

She almost says those words aloud as her temper begins to rise,

then she notices Beverly's lacerated ear and feels her focus shift.

"My God, Bevvie, why's your ear all cut up? Did one of them boys you been *swappin' more than spit* with do that to you?"

Beverly shakes her head, letting her hair fall forward to hide most of her face.

*And her ear.*

"They're my friends, Mama. They wouldn't hurt me like that."

"Wasn't thinkin' about your *friends*," Mama says with a slight sneer in her voice. "Was thinkin' maybe Henry Bowers done it, or them two lackwits he runs with."

"It wasn't them who fucked up my ear," Beverly says, somewhat annoyed that her mother thinks she would *ever* kiss anyone so vile. "Henry woulda just sliced it off."

*Or a nipple*, she thinks, even as her own stiffen in protest, poking sharp and sensitive against the underside of Ben Hanscom's t-shirt.

Elfrida notices. "Jesus, Bevvie, can't you at least wear the bra I bought you?" Her next words are bitter. "It might help your daddy keep his eyes where they belong."

Beverly jumps to her feet, livid with anger.

"He does more than look," she tells her mother, the look in her eyes so venomous Elfrida flinches away from it. "An' if you want my daddy to quit lookin' at my tits or touchin' me to make sure I'm still a virgin, tell him yourself!"

She watches Mama's face, waiting for the shock, or the anger, or *something*, but instead there is only a vague look of shame.

"Bevvie," Elfrida says, refusing to look at her, "you know why your father acts like that, don't you? He's concerned you ain't whorin' around town like folks been sayin'."

As the meaning of her mother's words hits her, Beverly's anger turns to hurt and she drops back into her chair and stares at her.

"You knew, Mama? All this time he's been sneakin' into my room at night, and you fucking *knew*?"

Elfrida opens her mouth to say something, but Beverly cuts her off.

"Hush, Mama. Just shut your mouth and let me say my piece." When Elfrida stays silent she continues. "All my life, since I was a little girl, every damn time Daddy beat me stupid, I wanted to hate you for never stopping him, but I always figured you were just scared he might hit you worse, so I forgave you."

"I didn't deserve it," Elfrida mutters, almost to herself.

"No you didn't," Beverly agrees, "'cause Daddy won't hit you, not ever, so long as you keep spreading your legs for him."

Elfrida slaps her, and Beverly – to the total surprise of both of them – slaps her right back.

They glare at each other, each standing now, and it is Beverly who finally breaks the silence.

"You don't get to hit me, Mama, not when you got Al to do it for you."

She takes up her axe handle, downs the rest of her Pepsi, and pads over to the phone.

---

"Hello?"

"Hi Aunt Sophie. It's me, Bevvie."

"Why, hello there. Is everything okay? I haven't heard from you in a spell."

"It's been a weird summer. Listen, Aunty, is your spare bedroom still available?"

***"Well sure. I can have it fixed up for you tomorrow."***

***"Make it tonight and you got a deal."***

---

"You beat me to it," Elfrida says, watching as her daughter hangs up the phone after her second call, which had been to the cab company.

"What's that s'posed to mean?"

"Well, I see how it is with you an' your daddy, an' I hear you sassin' him like you just done me, and I reckon it's for your own good to send you off for a while."

Beverly stares at her, almost too incredulous for words.

"Hold on a minute. You mean to tell me *Daddy* acts like an asshole, does shit to me he should be in fuckin' jail for, an' you want *me* to leave? That is so screwed!"

She spins on her heel, still holding the axe handle, and heads down the hallway leading to her bedroom. Elfrida's voice follows her.

"Where you goin'? We ain't done talkin' yet!"

"I am. If you got more to say, I'll be in my room, packin' my shit."

---

Elfrida leans against the doorframe of Beverly's room, watching in silence as her daughter – still barefoot but now wearing jeans and one of her own skimpy tops - tosses items into a small suitcase.

*Skirts and blouses, t-shirts - including the Derry Tigers one she'd just taken off - and shorts and jeans, her raggedy underwear, and all the socks she only bothers with in wintertime.*

"What about your heavy coat?" she asks, her first words since following the girl out of the kitchen. "It gets cold in Portland come snow season, same as here."

*No shit, Mama.*

"Yeah, I'm sort of aware of that, but my down jacket quit havin' any down in it two winters ago, and it got too small on me."

*Hairbrush, mirror, lip gloss and nail polish. Earrings and ankle bracelet. Her Nikes, and a pair of garish purple flip-flops Elfrida's never seen before. And last of all, the diary Bevvie'd quit writing in the summer she was eleven, when Al first started 'schooling' her late at night, just the two of them in here with the door locked.*

Elfrida feels sick.

"I'll give you money for a new coat," she says now, and Beverly turns from her packing and fixes her with a cold, level stare.

"Mama, I don't want your money, not one goddamn dime, but thanks for reminding me."

She kneels at the side of her bed, aware of Elfrida's curious eyes on her, and carefully pries up a loose floorboard. Then she reaches into the small space and pulls out a wad of bills.

*A large wad of bills.*

"Jeez, Bevvie," Elfrida cries, "where'd you get a stash like that?" Her greedy eyes narrow in suspicion. "You ain't been *stealin'*, have you?"

Beverly notes the look in her mother's eyes and quickly stuffs the money into her front jeans pocket.

"No, Mama, I earned it." She gives Elfrida a look. "And not the way Daddy might think, or the other pussies in this shitthole town, neither."

"Then how?" Elfrida asks, no longer shocked by her daughter's language. "Your father said he's been keepin' your money for you, you bein' barely thirteen an' all."

"Drinkin' it, you mean."



Elfrida doesn't dispute this, and Beverly smiles bitterly. "See, I figured you knew that, too. But here's the thing, Mama. As soon as Daddy went to pickin' me up on Fridays, Mrs. Theramenius caught on quick that he was scammin' my money for himself, so she started holdin' some back every week that he never knew about."

"Jeez," Elfrida mutters again. "How much you got there, anyway?"

"Well, I spent some, but ten bucks a week for a year. You figure it out."

"Al ain't gonna like that," Elfrida says, doing the math in her head.

"So don't tell him. Just say I'm gone an' leave it at that."

For the first time Elfrida's bravado falters and she looks a little nervous.

"He'll blame me for not stoppin' you."

"That's your problem," Beverly says coldly, snapping her suitcase shut. "But knowing you, Mama, you'll figure out *some* way to calm him. You'll cry crocodile tears, maybe, or wrap your fat legs around him, or promise to take his thing in your mouth an' swallow." She pauses for breath, her green eyes bright with malice behind tangled red hair, then delivers her final jab. "But if Al's really lucky, you'll give him all three."

Then, with her suitcase in one hand and her axe handle in the other, she walks out without so much as a backward glance.

## 9. Chapter 9

### Chapter 9 – Epilogue

*Portland, Maine - Summer 1991*

*They had come to her in the dark, six scared boys too young to fully grasp what she was offering of herself to save them, and now, at the tender age of fifteen, Beverly no longer remembers what the danger had ever been.*

*Hell, she barely remembers any of it, or what they did there in the dank, wet tunnels below Derry, but in her dreams she recalls that it was Eddie who came to her first, and Stuttering Bill last of all, but before Bill it was Ben, and now it is Ben and what they'd shared that haunts her sleep and brings her awake damp and needful and hurting.*

*It is always Ben she thinks of, lying sweaty and alone on her bed, missing the shy, heavyset boy who'd once claimed her heart with a poem she only remembers in her dreams.*

*"Bevvie, I don't think I can do this," he'd said that first time, looking so miserable her heart ached.*

*"Sure you can. I can feel it." And she could, too, a hard little nudge against her bare belly button.*

*"Make me fly," she'd whispered. "Show me how."*

*"Jesus, Beverly!" He was trembling in her arms, but she sensed this was not from fear but his desire and love for her.*

*"Show me," she said again, almost pleading. "Feel my hair if you want to. I know you like my hair."*

*So he had, reaching out to stroke the damp, tangled length of it, his other hand gently finding her breasts, and the nudge against her belly became a bit more insistent.*

*"Oh, yes," she murmured, her fingers guiding him, and this time –*

*unlike with the others – there was pleasure as well as pain.*

*Then all too soon it was over, and she felt Ben's lips brush against the hair over her left ear.*

*"My heart burns there too," he whispered, and in that one shining moment – in the arms of a boy she refuses to forget – Beverly Marsh knew what it meant to be loved.*

**THE END**